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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEIVED OVERQUALIFICATION AND JOB  
ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS: THE MODERATING ROLE OF  
PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of The Department of Psychology

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

by

Emily Meyer

May 2020

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEIVED OVERQUALIFICATION AND JOB  
ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS: THE MODERATING ROLE OF  
PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT

by

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

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May 2020

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## ABSTRACT

### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEIVED OVERQUALIFICATION AND JOB ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS: THE MODERATING ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT

by Emily Meyer

It has been shown that employees who perceive to be overqualified in their roles are more likely to display negative attitudes and behaviors; however, little attention has been paid to the possible moderators of this relationship. Therefore, the present study proposed that psychological empowerment would moderate the relationship between perceived overqualification and job attitudes (affective commitment and careerist attitudes) and behaviors (counterproductive work behaviors). It was hypothesized that the relationship between perceived overqualification and these job attitudes and behaviors would be weaker for employees with higher levels of psychological empowerment than for employees with lower levels of psychological empowerment. Results from a self-report survey of 138 employed individuals showed that psychological empowerment moderated only the relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive behaviors. Results also showed that perceived overqualification was negatively related to affective commitment and careerist attitudes, regardless of levels of psychological empowerment. Consistent with past findings, these results suggest that the negative consequence of overqualification on counterproductive behaviors is avoidable and emphasize the importance of person-job fit in hiring employees in order to reduce the negative outcomes of perceived overqualification.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my thesis committee for their expertise and guidance throughout this process. Specifically, I would like to thank Dr. Megumi Hosoda for her abounding encouragement, guidance, and patience. I cannot express how grateful I am for all the time and energy you put into my success. I would also like to thank Dr. Howard Tokunaga for providing further support with everything from the I/O program itself, my internship, statistics, and my thesis. I can honestly say that I have never been more excited to analyze data sets than I am now, after this program. A special thanks to my third reader, Colleen Ryan, who not only gave me a chance to work on an amazing team at Waymo, but also allowed me full-range to use and refine my skills.

To my Mom and Dad, thank you for supporting me no matter the circumstance and for allowing me to choose my own path. Thank you for making me into the person I am today who lets nothing stand in her way. To my sister, Meagan, I will forever appreciate the long phone calls where you listened to me complain, then assuring me that everything would work out. Thank you for being the older sibling who went through everything first, making my path a little easier. To Georgie, who endured this process right by my side. Thank you for listening to me reading my endless drafts and for sharing in my successes and failures. Without your constant support, I would not have been able to finish this paper. To my cohort, thank you for your advice, help, and shoulders to lean on. I couldn't have asked for a greater group of people to share these last two years.

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## **Introduction**

Overqualification, or working in a job that is below an employee's full working capacity, has become an important, but understudied, topic (Lin, Law & Zhou, 2017). Statistics show that a significant percentage of employees worldwide are overqualified. For example, roughly 18% to 25% of working Americans and Europeans feel they have more knowledge, skills, and/or abilities than their job requires (Cable & Hendey, 2009; Maynard & Parfyonova, 2013). Additionally, 34% of college graduates and 44% of new college graduates in the United States said that they accepted a position for which a college degree was not required (Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2017). The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010) reported that about 8.8 million workers were forced to work a part-time job because they were unable to find full-time jobs, including over 20% of these workers who considered themselves "highly overqualified" (Vaisey, 2006).

Thus, overqualification affects a large portion of the workforce, regardless of level of education, experience, or tenure (Maynard & Joseph, 2006). It poses a major concern for both individuals and their companies, as overqualification has been associated with negative outcomes such as increased counterproductive work behavior, careerist attitudes, turnover intentions, job search behaviors, and decreased affective commitment (Luksyte, Spitzmueller, & Maynard, 2011).

Because of the negative consequences associated with overqualification, researchers have started to pay attention to factors that might mitigate its negative consequences. Several studies (e.g., Dooley & Prause, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 1997) have examined non-work-related factors (e.g., gender, self-esteem, emotional support) as moderators of

the relationship between overqualification and non-work-related outcomes (e.g., depression, perceived health).

Erdogan and Bauer (2009) have stated that there is a lack of research pertaining to moderators that are within an organization's control and whether such factors might mitigate the negative outcomes of overqualification. They proposed that psychological empowerment, defined as a motivational construct, manifested in four cognitions (meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact (Spreitzer, 1995), moderates the relationship between perceived overqualification and work-related outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction, intentions to remain, voluntary turnover). Their results showed that perceived overqualification was negatively related to job satisfaction and intentions to remain, and positively related to voluntary turnover only when employees experienced low psychological empowerment. Based on these findings, they called for more studies on the moderating role of work-related factors on the relationship between overqualification and work-related outcomes.

Therefore, the current study examined psychological empowerment as a moderator of the relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment, careerist attitudes, and counterproductive work behaviors. By examining psychological empowerment as a moderator, this research hoped to add to the literature that delineates boundary conditions of the relationships between perceived overqualification and outcomes, and to explain how companies can mitigate the negative consequences experienced by employees who feel overqualified (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009). The

following sections provide the definition of perceived overqualification and the two dominant theories that explain its negative outcomes.

### **Definition of Perceived Overqualification**

Feldman (1996) originally defined underemployment as holding a job that is inferior, lesser, or lower quality type of employment relative to some standard and identified five dimensions of underemployment: (a) possessing more education than the job requires, (b) having more skills and experience than the job requires, (c) involuntary employment in a field outside of the area of education, (d) involuntary employment in part-time, temporary, or intermittent employment, and (e) low pay relative to the previous job.

Feldman's first two dimensions, surplus education and/or experience, are often referred to as overqualification (Maynard & Joseph, 2006). Thus, overqualification occurs when employees have qualifications (e.g., education, skills, knowledge) that exceed normal job requirements (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Khan & Morrow, 1991). Researchers from a variety of perspectives have examined underemployment using different terminology. Thus, underemployed employees are labeled as inadequately employed, overqualified, or underutilized (McKee-Ryan & Harvey, 2011) and many researchers used overqualification and underemployment interchangeably (Luksyte et al., 2011). Thus, the present study uses perceived overqualification and perceived underemployment interchangeably and reviews the research on both terms.

Overqualification can be measured objectively or subjectively. Objective overqualification generally relies on objective markers and is gauged by the discrepancy between an individual's level of education or experience and the requirements of his or

her position or job (Fine, 2007; Johnson & Johnson, 2000). For example, workers who are overqualified could have a college degree when their role requires only a high school diploma. However, few researchers have measured overqualification objectively due to the drastic variation of job content between positions, even those with the same title (Harari et al., 2017). Objective measurements also rarely suffice to explain how people feel and behave at work, as they are deficient in understanding the overqualified employee's psychological experiences (Erdogan, Bauer, Peiro, & Truxillo, 2011).

Therefore, the majority of studies have measured perceived overqualification, which is defined as the extent to which employees believe that they have a surplus of education, experience, and/or knowledge, skills, and abilities, relative to the requirements of the position (Maynard & Joseph, 2006; Maynard & Parfyonova, 2013). Maynard and Feldman (2011) argued that attitudinal, emotional, and behavioral consequences of overqualification could be better predicted by subjective experiences than objective evaluations. Indeed, Kahn and Morrow (1991) showed that perceived overqualification was more strongly related to job satisfaction than was objective overqualification.

### **Theories Used to Explain the Consequences of Perceived Overqualification**

Although many theories have been used to explain the negative outcomes of perceived overqualification, the two most dominant are relative deprivation theory and person-job fit theory (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Harari et al., 2017; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman & Johnson, 2005; Tiraboschi & Maass, 1998).

**Relative deprivation theory.** Relative deprivation theory contends that individuals' objective situations are not sufficient to explain how they feel and behave. Instead, their

reactions to situations depend upon their subjective evaluations (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009). According to this theory, people experience deprivation when they desire, and feel entitled to, certain objects or opportunities, but the possession of these objects or opportunities are impossible (Crosby, 1984). A feeling of discontentment due to perceived relative deprivation leads to poorer job attitudes, such as decreased organizational commitment, and increased job turnover (McKee-Ryan, Virick, Prussia, Harvey, & Lilly, 2009).

Perceived overqualification is likely to trigger feelings of relative deprivation because as individuals attain education, experience, knowledge, and skills, they expect to hold a higher place in society and to occupy a job they feel they deserve (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Harari et al., 2017). Thus, when individuals find themselves in a position they perceive as being below their expectations (i.e., their skills and abilities are not being fully utilized), they experience a sense of relative deprivation (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Harari et al., 2017; Johnson & Johnson, 1996; Maynard & Joseph, 2006).

**Person-job fit theory.** Person-environment fit (P-E) theory refers to the congruence between individuals' characteristics and aspects of their work environments (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011). P-E fit is a multidimensional construct that encompasses person-job (P-J) fit. P-J fit is defined as the degree of congruence between individuals' characteristics and those of a specific job (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011). There are two types of P-J fit: needs-supply fit and demands-abilities fit (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Needs-supplies fit refers to how well the environment meets an employees' needs, desires, goals, or preferences. Demands-ability fit is defined as the degree to which an

employee's knowledge, skills, and abilities are compatible with the requirements of the job. Poor P-J fit occurs when individuals' needs, desires, or goals are not satisfied by the environment or when individuals have more knowledge, skills, and abilities than the job requires. Perceived overqualification is poor P-J fit, as workers feel they have a surplus of knowledge, skills, and/or abilities and their companies have failed to meet their needs (Luksyte et al., 2011). P-J fit predicts that the poorer the perceived fit between individuals and their jobs, the more negative individual (e.g., decreased job satisfaction and organizational identification) and organizational outcomes (e.g., decreased organizational commitment, job performance) (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

Therefore, these two theories predict that perceived overqualification, due to perceived relative deprivation or poor person-job fit, is likely to be associated with negative outcomes. The following section reviews the literature on the consequences of perceived overqualification, with an emphasis on affective commitment, careerist attitudes, and counterproductive work behaviors.

### **Consequences of Perceived Overqualification**

McKee-Ryan and Harvey (2011) conducted a meta-analysis on perceived underemployment (i.e., perceived overqualification) and reported that underemployment was negatively related to workers' job attitudes (i.e., job satisfaction, affective commitment), displayed mixed results regarding its relationship with job performance (i.e., in-role performance and extra-role behavior), and was positively related to employee withdrawal (i.e., intention to quit, turnover). They also found that underemployment was related to poor psychological well-being (i.e., psychosomatic



symptoms, depression) and reduced health. These results stipulate that underemployment is linked to many types of negative outcomes for both workers and their organizations.

The present study focuses on three outcomes of perceived overqualification; affective commitment, careerist attitudes, and counterproductive work behaviors. These outcomes are worth exploring for several reasons. First, these variables represent different types of outcomes of perceived overqualification; attitudinal (affective commitment and careerist attitudes) and behavioral (counterproductive work behaviors) Maynard and Feldman (2011) argued are best predicted by the subjective experiences of overqualification. Although these variables have been studied as potential consequences of perceived overqualification, to my best knowledge, no one has examined psychological empowerment as a moderator of the relationship between perceived overqualification and these variables. Low levels of affective commitment are associated with negative outcomes such as higher turnover (Tett & Meyer, 1993), decreased productivity (Mercurio, 2015), and lower investment in one's career (Johnson, Morrow, & Johnson, 2002). Careerist attitudes can lead employees to seek career development opportunities through deception, are related to prioritizing personal goals over the company's best interests, and are connected to employees engaging in deceptive behavior to get promotions or advancements (Feldman & Weitz, 1991). Counterproductive work behavior can cause tremendous financial strain to an organization, as the average employee "steals" between 50 minutes to 4.5 hours per week by showing up late, leaving early, and taking extended breaks and lunches (Osterhaus, 2015).

Employees who feel overqualified are often relatively high-level performers - in spite of their unsatisfactory employment situation - companies may lose valuable talent when these workers quit (Erdogan, Bauer, Peiro, & Truxillo, 2011; Fine, 2007). By identifying conditions that might offset the negative consequences of perceived overqualification, both companies and employees who feel overqualified, are likely to benefit because those organizations could retain valuable talent and avoid the negative consequences of employees perceiving overqualification.

**Affective commitment.** Affective commitment is defined as an employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in, the organization and reflects employees' genuine desire to continue working for that organization (Meyer, Allen, & Gellatly, 1990). Those who are affectively committed to their company continue to work for their organization because they desire to do so and identify themselves with their company (Meyer et al., 1990).

Using person-job fit theory, Johnson and colleagues (2002) argued that perceived overqualification would have a negative relationship with affective commitment. They theorized that the perceived mismatch between employees' expectations and the reality of the job would have negative consequences for affective commitment due to the frustrations associated with the discrepancy between expected and actual job. They sampled 1,727 adult workers in a variety of industries (i.e. nurses, railroad workers, and U.S. postal service employees) and found a negative relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment.

Similar to Johnson and colleagues (2002), Zheng and Wang (2017) hypothesized that perceived overqualification would be related negatively to affective commitment. Using data from 199 managers in China, they found that perceived overqualification was negatively related to affective commitment. These results indicated that the more employees believed that they were overqualified for their jobs, they were less likely to affectively commit to their organization.

Several other studies (e.g., Allen & Meyer, 1991; Bogler & Somech, 2004; Maynard & Joseph, 2006) have also found a negative relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment. Given that perceived overqualification is consistently related to affective commitment, the present study tests the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1:* There will be a negative relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment, such that the more employees feel that they are overqualified, the less they will be affectively committed to their organization.

**Careerist attitudes.** Careerist attitudes refer to an individual's propensity to pursue career advancement through non-performance-based means (Feldman & Weitz, 1991). People with careerist attitudes do not believe that good job performance and competence are linked to job security, career progression, or advancement. Because these employees do not believe they can advance in a company through merit alone, they feel it is necessary to use social relationships to get ahead, that it is important to cultivate the appearance of being successful, and that it is necessary to engage in deceptive behaviors

(Feldman & Weitz, 1991). To further their career development, those with careerist attitudes are likely to seek opportunities through non-performance-based strategies, such as deception, impression management, and networking (Feldman & Turnley, 1995). They noted that careerist attitudes are a double-edged sword; employees may succeed in getting ahead more quickly, but they may create resistance from their colleagues and superiors who resent being manipulated or deceived.

According to Feldman and Weitz (1991), workers with careerist attitudes believe that competence in their role may be useful, but performing careerist tactics is essential in securing advancement (i.e., cultivating social relationships with colleagues simply to meet their own needs and accrue business contacts). Careerists also look for mentors who could open future doors for them and/or sponsor them for promotions, rather than looking for mentors who could coach them in developing new skills (Feldman & Weitz, 1991).

Feldman and Weitz (1991) argue that employees who feel overqualified grow cynical about the relationship between hard work and employment success, thus turning to careerist attitudes to obtain a better job. Indeed, several studies (e.g., Bolino & Feldman, 2000) found that employees who felt overqualified often lost interest in, and developed negative attitudes toward their careers. Feldman and Turnley (1995) investigated the relationship between perceived underemployment and careerist attitudes. They surveyed 283 business college graduates and found that perceived underemployment was significantly and positively related to careerist job attitudes. In other words, employees who felt they had more knowledge, skills, and abilities than their role required were more

likely to display non-performance-based tactics to get ahead in their careers, such as networking with friends and colleagues in hopes to get a promotion or advancement in their field.

Similarly, Feldman, Leana, and Bolino (2002) theorized that perceived underemployment may lead to more careerist attitudes. They examined 517 re-employed managers (managers who were recently fired from one organization and hired at another company) in a variety of industries and found that perceived underemployment was significantly related to careerist attitudes, such that re-employed managers who felt underemployed were more likely to use political behavior as a substitute for on-the-job competence. Given these findings, the present study tests the following hypothesis.

*Hypothesis 2: Perceived overqualification will be positively related to careerist attitudes, such that the more employees feel they are overqualified, the more they will have careerist attitudes.*

**Counterproductive work behaviors.** Counterproductive work behaviors are defined as behaviors that are intended to cause harm to organizations and their members (Liu, Luksyte, Zhou, Shi, & Wang., 2015). Examples of such behaviors are intentional lateness, absence, slow work, longer breaks, internet misuse, employee theft and fraud, the destroying of organizational property, and client abuse (Dalal, 2005; Fine & Edward, 2017; Luksyte et al., 2011; Spector, Fox, Brursema, Goh, & Kessler, 2006). Counterproductive behaviors are often not displayed for serious offenses like theft, fraud, or harassment, but rather for more minor offenses such as lateness, decreased productivity, wasting time, withdrawal, or disengagement from the work environment

(Fine & Edward, 2017; Spector et al., 2006). However, monetary damages of minor organization-oriented counterproductive work behaviors can still be substantial (Fine & Edward, 2017). For example, absenteeism can cost an organization about 35% of their total payroll costs per year (Liberty Mutual, 2011). Additionally, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019) has estimated that organizations lose as much as \$100 billion annually to absenteeism.

Luksyte et al. (2011) hypothesized that employees who felt overqualified would display more counterproductive work behaviors than qualified employees. Using data from a sample of 215 workers, their results showed that incumbents who felt overqualified displayed more counterproductive work behaviors (i.e., stealing, speaking poorly of their supervisors, feeling anger toward their organization, spending time on unrelated tasks at work) than workers who felt accurately qualified. The researchers concluded that overqualified employees were more likely to view jobs that were incongruent with their competencies as a waste of their valuable resources, such as time or effort, and consequently engaged in counterproductive behaviors.

Liu and his colleagues (2015) also examined the relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behaviors. Data were collected from 224 workers and supervisors in China who viewed their jobs as a career, not as a temporary position. The counterproductive work behaviors that were studied included speaking poorly of their supervisor, spending time on tasks unrelated to work, behaving unpleasantly, showing anger towards the organization, and stealing. Counterproductive behaviors were rated by employees themselves and separately by their supervisors. The

results showed that there was a positive relationship between perceived overqualification and self-rated and supervisor-rated counterproductive work behaviors, such that those who felt overqualified reported engaging in more counterproductive behaviors; supervisors of such employees also rated them as engaging in more counterproductive behaviors.

Given that perceived overqualification is consistently related to counterproductive work behaviors, the present study tests the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 3:* There will be a positive relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behaviors, such that the more employees feel they are overqualified, the more they will display counterproductive work behaviors.

### **Moderators of Perceived Overqualification**

Because perceived overqualification has been found to be related to negative work outcomes, researchers have begun to examine variables that may mitigate its detrimental effects. Although several studies (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, 1997; Dooley & Prause, 1997) have examined moderators of the relationship between perceived overqualification and outcomes, these moderators have been non-work-related factors (e.g., emotional support, marital status) and the outcomes have not been work-related (e.g., depression, perceived health). For example, Johnson and Johnson (1997) found a strong negative relationship between perceived overqualification and health for those who had low emotional support than those who had high emotional support.

Erdogan and Bauer (2009) called for more research on identifying work-related moderators on work-related outcomes of perceived overqualification. The lack of attention on work-related moderators is troublesome from both a practical and theoretical standpoint. For example, from a practical point of view, identifying work-related moderators can ensure both organizations and employees who feel overqualified are not likely to suffer from negative consequences. From a theoretical point of view, identifying moderators that mitigate the negative consequences of perceived overqualification is likely to expand the perceived overqualification literature.

Researchers (e.g., Erdogan & Bauer, 2011; Liu et al 2015) have examined work-related moderators in order to understand when and how overqualified workers are less likely to experience negative work outcomes. For example, Maynard and Parfyonova (2013) examined competence and growth work value (i.e., the level of importance employees place on professional advancement in their organization) as moderators of the relationship between perceived overqualification and two outcomes: affective commitment and active job search behaviors. They hypothesized that, among those who felt overqualified, employees who believed their organization utilized their talents and challenged them would be more affectively committed to their company and more likely to stay. They found that competence and growth work value moderated the relationship between perceived overqualification, affective commitment, and active job search behaviors, such that overqualified employees were more likely to be committed to their organization and less likely to actively search for a job only when they felt their skills were valued and that their company provided them with opportunities to advance when



compared to qualified employees. They also found that the relationship between perceived overqualification and job search behaviors was stronger for those who strongly valued competence and growth work. Specifically, among employees who perceived overqualification, those who valued skill utilization felt less emotionally connected to the organization and were more likely to search for alternative employment. These results indicate that the negative consequences of feeling overqualification can be mitigated.

Zheng and Wang (2017) examined the moderating role of organizational learning on the relationship between perceived overqualification and work outcomes. Organizational learning is the process of acquiring knowledge and utilizing newly learned information in the organization and amongst its members (Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2008) and has been found to motivate employees, generate more positive job attitudes, and increase job satisfaction (Zheng & Wang, 2017). Using 301 employees in China, they examined the moderating role of organizational learning on the relationship between perceived overqualification and job satisfaction, affective commitment, and performance. Results indicated that when organizational learning was high, the negative consequences of perceived overqualification on affective commitment and performance were weakened. However, the research showed no significant relationship on perceived overqualification and affective commitment or performance when organizational learning was low. This implies that as individuals who perceive overqualification may already have more skills and better abilities than their coworkers, the scope for improvement of their own skills and abilities through organizational learning may be quite limited. The results also found

that organizational learning did not moderate the relationship between perceived overqualification and job satisfaction.

Liu et al., (2015) examined the moderating relationship of justice sensitivity (i.e. how people react to unfair treatment) on the relationship between perceived overqualification and organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) and anger toward employment situations. Their results showed that justice sensitivity moderated the relationship between perceived overqualification and OBSE and the relationship between perceived overqualification and anger toward employment situations, such that these relationships were stronger for employees with higher levels of justice sensitivity.

Although several boundary conditions on the relationship between perceived overqualification and work outcomes have been identified, there might be other factors that can mitigate the negative consequences of perceived overqualification that are within an organization's control (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009). There is still a gap in the literature regarding what an organization can do to lessen the negative effects on workers who feel overqualified. This study proposed that psychological empowerment is a moderator under the organization's control, which is likely to decrease the negative effects of perceived overqualification, with respect to outcomes of affective commitment, careerist attitudes, and counterproductive work behaviors.

### **Psychological Empowerment as a Moderator of Perceived Overqualification**

Psychological empowerment is defined as intrinsic motivation and reflects employees' orientation to their work role. Psychological empowerment is manifested in four cognitions: self-determination, competence, meaning, and impact (Spreitzer, 1995).

According to Spreitzer (1995), self-determination is a person's sense of having choice in initiating and regulating his or her actions and reflects autonomy in the initiation and continuation of work behaviors (e.g., making decisions about work methods).

Competence is a person's belief in his or her capability to perform activities with skill and is analogous to personal mastery. Meaning is the value of a work goal or purpose, in relation to a person's own standards and involves a fit between the requirements of a work role and his or her beliefs and values. Finally, impact is the degree to which a person can influence his or her work outcomes. Spreitzer had noted that these four dimensions are added together to create an overall construct of psychological empowerment and that psychological empowerment is highest when all four dimensions are also high.

When psychologically empowered, individuals feel they have the ability to determine their work outcomes, feel competent to achieve their goals, and believe they have an impact on their job environment (Spreitzer, 1995, 1996). Empowerment prompts employees to believe the organization trusts their judgment and competence (Spreitzer, 1995, 1996), which can communicate to employees that they have high status within the organization (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009).

It is believed that the negative relationship between perceived overqualification and work outcomes might be lessened for workers who are psychologically empowered. Erdogan and Bauer (2009) asserted that the feelings of deprivation or poor job-person fit experienced by workers who feel overqualified might be alleviated by attributes of the work environment that provides autonomy, respect, and value for their work. Using data

from 258 sales associates in a Turkish major retail clothing chain, Erdogan and Bauer (2009) tested whether psychological empowerment moderated the relationship between perceived overqualification and several work attitudes (job satisfaction and turnover intention) and behaviors (objective job performance and voluntary turnover).

Results showed that psychological empowerment moderated the relationship between job satisfaction and intentions to remain, such that perceived overqualification was negatively related to job satisfaction and intention to remain in the organization only when psychological empowerment was low. There was no relationship between perceived overqualification and job satisfaction and intentions to remain when psychological empowerment was high. The same pattern of these findings was observed for voluntary turnover, such that perceived overqualification was positively related to voluntary turnover only when psychological empowerment was low. However, psychological empowerment did not moderate the relationship between perceived overqualification and objective job performance; objective job performance was higher among employees who believed they were overqualified regardless of the levels of psychological empowerment. These findings indicate that those who felt overqualified were less satisfied with their jobs, more likely to intend to remain in the organization, and less likely to leave the organization voluntarily if they were psychologically empowered. Based on these findings, Erdogan and Bauer (2009) concluded that the negative consequences of perceived overqualification were avoidable.

Currently, there is no existing research that has examined the moderating effect of psychological empowerment on the relationship between perceived overqualification and

affective commitment. Job satisfaction and affective commitment are two of the most studied outcomes of perceived overqualification and the two variables have been found to be highly correlated with one another. Erdogan and Bauer (2009) found that psychological empowerment moderated the relationship between perceived overqualification and job satisfaction. The current research expects a similar outcome when examining the moderating effect of psychological empowerment on the relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment.

As mentioned earlier, psychological empowerment prompts employees to believe their company trusts their judgment and competence (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009). Consequently, if employees are psychologically empowered, they are more likely to be affectively committed to their organizations. Thus, the negative relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment might be weakened for overqualified workers who feel empowered. Therefore, the following hypothesis is tested in the present study.

*Hypothesis 4:* The negative relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment will be moderated by psychological empowerment, such that the negative relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment will be weaker when psychological empowerment is high than when it is low.

Although perceived overqualification has been shown to be positively related to careerist attitudes, careerist attitudes have never been examined in relation to psychological empowerment. Thus, the present study examines psychological

empowerment as a moderator of the relationship between perceived overqualification and careerist attitudes.

Psychological empowerment and careerist attitudes both stem from the utilization (or lack thereof) of employees' abilities, skills, and knowledge (Feldman, 1996; Spreitzer, 1995). Feldman and Weitz (1991) found employees who felt overqualified grew cynical about the relationship between employment success and hard work, thus turning to careerist attitudes to obtain a better job or advancement in their current company. Having high levels of empowerment should communicate to employees who perceive themselves as being overqualified that the organization recognizes and values their work, thus weakening the relationship between perceived overqualification and careerist attitudes.

The present study tests the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 5:* The positive relationship between perceived overqualification and careerist attitudes will be moderated by psychological empowerment, such that the positive relationship between perceived overqualification and careerist attitudes will be weaker when psychological empowerment is high than when it is low.

Liu et al. (2015) looked at the moderating effect of justice sensitivity on the relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behaviors. However, no other studies have examined how psychological empowerment could moderate this relationship. The current study argued that if people are psychologically empowered, meaning they work in an organization where they are given autonomy, and are valued and respected, they will not engage in counterproductive work behaviors that

harm the organization or their co-workers (e.g., decreasing productivity, wasting time, and withdrawing from their organization) (Fine & Edward, 2017). Therefore, the following hypothesis is tested in the present study:

*Hypothesis 6:* Psychological empowerment will moderate the positive relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behaviors, such that the positive relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive behaviors will be weaker when psychological empowerment is high than when it is low.

### **The Present Study**

Given that the negative consequences of overqualification could be avoidable (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009), the present study examines psychological empowerment as a moderator of the relationship between perceived overqualification and three work outcomes: namely, affective commitment, careerist attitudes, and counterproductive work behaviors. To the best of my knowledge, no studies have examined psychological empowerment as a moderator of the relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment, careerist attitudes, or counterproductive work behaviors. Researchers continue to realize the need to examine the consequences of perceived overqualification in order to identify boundary conditions that may mitigate its detrimental effects. By examining psychological empowerment as a moderator, this study contributes to the literature that delineates and tests boundary conditions of overqualification and explicates how companies can benefit from hiring workers who feel overqualified.

## Method

### Participants

Data were collected through an online Qualtrics survey. More than 500 individuals from my personal and professional network were invited to participate in the study.

Among those, 167 individuals responded, resulting in a response rate of 33.4%.

Participants who did not meet the criteria (i.e., currently employed, have been working at their current company for three or more months, and 18 years of age or older) and/or had a substantial amount of missing data were removed from further analyses. The final sample consisted of 138 participants.

The demographic information of participants is presented in Table 1. The majority of the respondents ( $n = 92$ , 66.6%) were employed full-time at the time of data collection, whereas the rest ( $n = 46$ , 33.3%) were working part-time. The most frequently reported tenure was in the range of 4 months to 2 years ( $n = 89$ , 64.5%), followed by 3 to 5 years ( $n = 18$ , 13.0%) and 6 to 8 years ( $n = 15$ , 10.8%). Respondents worked in a variety of industries, including education ( $n = 26$ , 18.8%), computer software/electronics ( $n = 22$ , 15.9%), healthcare/pharmaceuticals ( $n = 16$ , 11.6%), food services ( $n = 13$ , 9.4%), and sales/retail ( $n = 11$ , 8.0%). Most participants were young in age; they were between the ages of 18 to 24 ( $n = 54$ , 39.1%) and 25 to 34 ( $n = 48$ , 34.1%). The sample consisted of 65.9% ( $n = 91$ ) women and 33.3% ( $n = 46$ ) men. Most participants identified themselves as White ( $n = 71$ , 51.5%), followed by 17.4% ( $n = 24$ ) identifying as two or more races, and 15.2% ( $n = 21$ ) identifying as Asian.



Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents*

Variable		<i>n</i>	%
Work Type	Full-Time	92	66.7%
	Part-Time	46	33.3%
Tenure	4 months - 2 years	89	64.5%
	3 years - 5 years	18	13.0%
	6 years - 8 years	15	10.9%
	9 years - 11 years	4	2.9%
	12 years - 14 years	5	3.6%
	15+ years	7	5.1%
Industry	Computer Software/ Electronics	22	15.9%
	Education	26	18.8%
	Engineering/Architecture	10	7.3%
	Finance/ Insurance	5	3.6%
	Food Services	13	9.4%
	Healthcare/ Pharmaceutical	16	11.6%
	Legal	3	2.2%
	Sales/Retail	11	8.0%
	Other	32	23.1%
Age	18-42 years	54	39.1%
	25-34 years	47	34.1%
	35-44 years	13	9.4%
	45-54 years	7	5.1%
	55-64 years	14	10.1%
	65 or older	2	1.5%
Gender	Male	46	33.3%
	Female	90	65.2%
Ethnicity	Hispanics of any race	11	8.0%
	American Indian or Alaska Native	1	0.7%
	Asian	21	15.2%
	Black or African American	7	5.1%
	Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1	0.7%
	White	71	51.5%
	Two or more races	24	17.4%
	Other	1	0.7%
	Prefer not to respond	1	0.7%

*Note.* *N* = 138.

## **Procedure**

Employees from various industries and backgrounds in my professional and personal network received an invitation to participate in the online survey through three social media platforms: Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram. Some participants were also recruited directly via email. Following the original post inviting individuals to participate, six individuals shared the survey with their networks, allowing for data collection to reach beyond my personal network of connections.

The invitation contained a brief message that provided the general purpose of the study, participation requirements, and a link to the survey. The purpose of the study was described as an examination of how an individual's work experience was related to his or her attitudes and behavior at work. Participants who clicked the link were then directed to a consent form. The consent form stated the purpose of the study, who to contact with questions, information about the risks and benefits of the study, and the anonymous and voluntary nature of the survey.

When participants clicked the button "I consent, begin the survey," participants indicated their willingness to continue with completing the survey. Participants who did not consent to the survey were directed to close their internet browser to exit the survey. An unsigned consent notice was deemed appropriate due to the anonymous nature of the project and minimal risk involved. Participants had the ability to start and stop the survey freely and the option to end the survey at any time.

After the survey was completed, participants were thanked for their participation and were provided with a debrief that contained the detailed purpose of the study and variables that were examined. All responses were logged in Qualtrics.

## **Measures**

**Perceived overqualification.** Perceived overqualification was measured with seven items from Maynard and Joseph's (2006) 9-item Perceived Overqualification questionnaire which assesses the degree to which individuals believe they possess more knowledge, skills, or abilities than their role requires. The items were measured on a 7-point Likert Scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). Sample items included, "My job requires less education than I have" and "The work experience that I have is not necessary to be successful on this job." The responses were combined and averaged to create a composite score for this variable. Higher scores indicated that participants felt more overqualified. Cronbach's alpha for this variable was .93, indicating high reliability.

**Affective commitment.** Affective commitment was measured with eight items from Allen and Meyer's (1993) affective commitment questionnaire which assesses the degree of individuals' emotional attachment to their organization. The items were measured on a 7-point Likert Scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). Sample items included, "I would be happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization" and "I feel that this organization's problems are my own." The responses were combined and averaged to create a composite score for this variable. Higher scores indicated that

participants felt more emotional attachment to their organization. Cronbach's alpha for this variable was .93, indicating high reliability.

**Careerist attitudes.** Careerist attitudes were measured with eight items taken from Feldman and Weitz's (1991) original 23 item questionnaire which assesses the extent to which individuals put their own personal needs ahead of their organization's needs. These items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). Sample items included, "Sometimes you have to use your social relationships with your coworkers and bosses to get ahead in an organization" and "You can't be completely honest when dealing with your boss." The responses were combined and averaged to create a composite score for this variable. Higher scores indicated that participants expressed more careerist attitudes in their current job role. Cronbach's alpha for this variable was .87, indicating high reliability.

**Counterproductive work behavior.** Counterproductive work behaviors were measured with eight items from Spector and Fox's (2001) questionnaire which contains 10 items that assess individuals' behaviors intended to cause harm on organizations and their members. These items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Very Often*). Sample items included, "How often have you purposely wasted your employer's supplies?" and "How often do you come to work late without permission?" The responses were combined and averaged to create a composite score for this variable. Higher scores indicated that participants engaged in more counterproductive behaviors. Cronbach's alpha for this variable was .84, indicating high reliability.

**Psychological empowerment.** Psychological empowerment was measured with nine items from Spreitzer's (1995) questionnaire which consists of 12 questions that measure individuals' degree of intrinsic motivation and orientation to their work role. The items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly Agree*). Sample items included, "The work I do is important to me" and "I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job." The responses were combined and averaged to create a composite score for this variable. Higher scores indicated that participants felt more psychologically empowered in their current job role. Cronbach's alpha for this variable was .83, indicating high reliability.

**Demographic information.** Participants responded to questions regarding their demographic information. These questions were type of employment, tenure, industry of employment, age, gender, and ethnicity.

Once data were collected, they were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Version 25) program utilizing Pearson correlations and hierarchical multiple regression analyses.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 displays descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations for the measured variables. On average, participants did not report high levels of overqualification in their current role ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ). Participants also reported that they were somewhat affectively committed to their organization ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ), had moderate levels of careerist attitudes ( $M = 4.40$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ), but displayed low levels of counterproductive work behaviors ( $M = 1.86$ ,  $SD = .67$ ). Furthermore, participants reported that they were psychologically empowered ( $M = 5.20$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ). Overall, the participants in the current study did not feel they were overqualified for their current role, showed moderate levels of affective commitment and careerist attitudes, but lower levels of counterproductive work behaviors. The sample, overall, had a high sense of psychological empowerment, indicating that they felt supported by their organization and that their organization provided them autonomy in their role.

### Pearson Correlations

As seen in Table 2, the results of the Pearson correlations showed that all the measured variables were significantly related to one another. There was a moderately strong and negative relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment,  $r(136) = -.37$ ,  $p < .01$ , such that the more overqualified participants felt for their role, the less they were emotionally committed to their organization. Perceived overqualification was positively related to careerist attitudes,  $r(136) = .42$ ,  $p < .01$ , and counterproductive work behaviors  $r(136) = .27$ ,  $p < .01$ , such that the more a person felt

they were overqualified for their role, the more likely they developed a propensity to pursue career advancement through non-performance-based means and were absent, late, or purposely reduce productivity. Lastly, there was a significant and negative relationship between perceived overqualification and psychological empowerment,  $r(136) = -.37, p < .01$ , such that the more overqualified employees felt for their role, the less they showed intrinsic motivation and orientation to their work role.

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics, Pearson Correlations, and Cronbach's Alpha Among the Measured Variables*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Perceived Overqualification	3.96	1.69	(.93)				
2. Affective Commitment	4.15	1.58	-.37 **	(.93)			
3. Careerist Attitudes	4.40	1.22	.42 **	-.59 **	(.87)		
4. Counterproductive Work Behavior	1.86	.67	.27 **	-.53 **	.46 **	(.84)	
5. Psychological Empowerment	5.20	1.02	-.37 **	.59 **	-.33 **	-.40 **	(.83)

*Note:* Reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) are in parentheses along the diagonal.

\*\*  $p < .01, N = 138$ .

Results of the Pearson correlations also showed that the three outcome variables (affective commitment, careerist attitudes, and counterproductive work behaviors) were significantly related to one another. Affective commitment was strongly and negatively related to careerist attitudes,  $r(136) = -.59, p < .01$ , and counterproductive work behaviors,  $r(136) = -.53, p < .01$ , such that the more individuals were emotionally attached to their organization, the less likely they developed careerist attitudes and displayed counterproductive work behaviors. Careerist attitudes were also significantly related to counterproductive work behaviors,  $r(136) = .46, p < .01$ , such that the more a person displayed attitudes such as believing they could not advance in a company through merit alone, the more likely they took longer breaks or disengaged from their work environment.

All three outcome variables were significantly related to psychological empowerment. Psychological empowerment was significantly related to affective commitment,  $r(136) = .59, p < .01$ , careerist attitudes,  $r(136) = -.33, p < .01$ , and counterproductive work behaviors,  $r(136) = -.40, p < .01$ , such that the more individuals felt empowered in their job role, the more they were affectively committed to the organization, and the less they sought advancement through non-performance based means, and wasted time and were late.

### **Tests of Hypotheses**

**Affective commitment.** Hypothesis 1 stated that there would be a negative relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment, such that the more employees felt they were overqualified, the less they would be affectively



committed to their organization. Hypothesis 4 stated that the negative relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment would be moderated by psychological empowerment, such that the negative relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment would be weaker when psychological empowerment was high than when it was low. To test these hypotheses, a hierarchical multiple regression (MRC) analysis was conducted, using three steps.

Perceived overqualification was entered into the first step of this analysis in order to determine whether perceived overqualification had a significant relationship with affective commitment. The moderator variable of psychological empowerment was entered in the second step. Lastly, the cross-product of perceived overqualification and psychological empowerment was entered in the third step to test for the moderating effect. Results of this analysis are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

*Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Affective Commitment*

	Predictor	<i>r</i>		<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		$\Delta R^2$	
Step 1	Perceived Overqualification	-.37	**	.14	***	.14	***
Step 2	Psychological Empowerment	.59	**	.37	***	.23	***
Step 3	Perceived Overqualification x Psychological Empowerment			.37		.00	

*Note:* \* $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ,  $N = 138$ .

Results from the first step of the analysis showed that perceived overqualification accounted for 14% of the variance in affective commitment ( $R^2 = .14$ ,  $R^2_{adj} = .13$ ,  $F(1, 136) = 22.06$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This means that perceived overqualification significantly contributed to the prediction of feeling affective commitment. This result showed support for Hypothesis 1.

In the second step, psychological empowerment accounted for an additional 23% of the variance in affective commitment above and beyond the effect of perceived overqualification ( $\Delta R^2 = .23$ ,  $\Delta F(1, 135) = 49.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This result showed that psychological empowerment predicted affective commitment above and beyond perceived overqualification.

Results of the third step showed that the incremental effect of the interaction of perceived overqualification and psychological empowerment was not significant ( $\Delta R^2 = .00$ ,  $\Delta F(1, 134) = .001$ ,  $p > .05$ ). The interaction effect did not account for a significant amount of variance above and beyond the direct effects of perceived overqualification and psychological empowerment. This result did not show support for Hypothesis 4. Overall, these results showed that both perceived overqualification and psychological empowerment significantly predicted affective commitment, but psychological empowerment did not moderate the relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment.

**Careerist attitudes.** Hypothesis 2 stated that perceived overqualification would be positively related to careerist attitudes, such that the more overqualified employees felt, the more they would have careerist attitudes. Hypothesis 5 stated that the positive

relationship between perceived overqualification and careerist attitudes would be moderated by psychological empowerment, such that the positive relationship between perceived overqualification and careerist attitudes would be weaker when psychological empowerment was high than when it was low. To test these hypotheses, a hierarchical multiple regression (MRC) analysis was conducted, using three steps.

Perceived overqualification was entered into the first step in order to determine whether perceived overqualification had a significant relationship with careerist attitudes. The moderator variable of psychological empowerment was entered in the second step. Lastly, the cross-product of perceived overqualification and psychological empowerment was entered in the third step to test for the moderating effect. Results of this analysis are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

*Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Careerist Attitudes*

	Predictor	<i>r</i>		<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		$\Delta R^2$	
Step 1	Perceived Overqualification	.42	**	.17	***	.17	***
Step 2	Psychological Empowerment	-.33	**	.21	*	.03	*
Step 3	Perceived Overqualification x Psychological Empowerment			.21		.00	

*Note:* \**p* < .05 \*\* *p* < .01 \*\*\* *p* < .001, *N* = 138

Results from the first step of the analysis showed that perceived overqualification accounted for 17% of the variance in careerist attitudes ( $R^2 = .17$ ,  $R^2_{adj} = .17$ ,  $F(1, 136) = 28.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This means that perceived overqualification significantly contributed to the prediction of participants' expression of careerist attitudes. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was supported.

In the second step, psychological empowerment significantly accounted for an additional 3% of the variance in careerist attitudes above and beyond the effect of perceived overqualification ( $\Delta R^2 = .03$ ,  $\Delta F(1, 135) = 5.87$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This result showed that psychological empowerment predicted careerist attitudes above and beyond perceived overqualification.

Results of the third step showed that the incremental effect of the interaction of perceived overqualification and psychological empowerment was not significant ( $\Delta R^2 = .00$ ,  $\Delta F(1, 134) = .56$ ,  $p > .05$ ). The interaction effect did not account for a significant amount of variance above and beyond the direct effects of perceived overqualification and psychological empowerment. This result did not show support for Hypothesis 5. Overall, results indicated that both perceived overqualification and psychological empowerment significantly predicted careerist attitudes, but psychological empowerment did not moderate the relationship between perceived overqualification and careerist attitudes.

**Counterproductive work behavior.** Hypothesis 3 stated that there would be a positive relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behaviors, such that the more employees felt they were overqualified, the more they

would display counterproductive work behaviors. Hypothesis 6 stated that psychological empowerment will moderate the positive relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behaviors, such that the positive relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive behaviors will be weaker when psychological empowerment is high than when it is low. To test these hypotheses, a hierarchical multiple regression (MRC) analysis was conducted, using three steps.

Perceived overqualification was entered into the first step in order to determine whether perceived overqualification had a significant relationship with counterproductive work behaviors. The moderator variable of psychological empowerment was entered in the second step. Lastly, the cross-product of perceived overqualification and psychological empowerment was entered in the third step to test for the moderating effect. Results of this analysis are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

*Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Counterproductive Work Behaviors*

	Predictor	<i>r</i>		<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		$\Delta R^2$	
Step 1	Perceived Overqualification	.27	**	.07		.07	**
Step 2	Psychological Empowerment	-.40	**	.17	***	.10	***
Step 3	Perceived Overqualification x Psychological Empowerment	.05	**	.22	**	.04	***

*Note:* \**p* < .05 \*\* *p* < .01 \*\*\* *p* < .001, *N* = 138

Results from the first step of the analysis showed that perceived overqualification accounted for 7% of the variance in counterproductive work behaviors ( $R^2 = .07$ ,  $R^2_{adj} = .06$ ,  $F(1, 136) = 10.27$ ,  $p < .01$ ). This means that perceived overqualification significantly contributed to the prediction of participants' engagement in counterproductive work behaviors. This result showed support for Hypothesis 3.

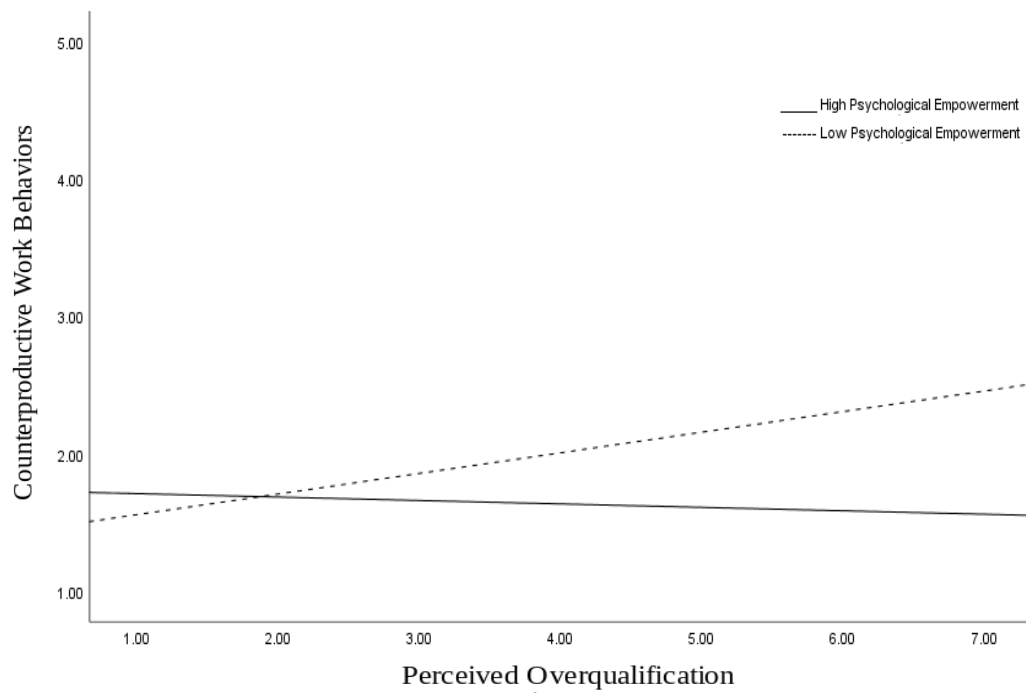
In the second step, psychological empowerment significantly accounted for an additional 10% of the variance in counterproductive work behaviors, above and beyond perceived overqualification ( $\Delta R^2 = .10$ ,  $\Delta F(1, 135) = 17.00$ ,  $p < .001$ ). This result showed that psychological empowerment predicted counterproductive work behaviors above and beyond perceived overqualification.

Results of the third step showed that the incremental effect of the interaction of perceived overqualification and psychological empowerment was significant ( $\Delta R^2 = .04$ ,  $\Delta F(1, 134) = 7.37$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The interaction effect accounted for an additional 4% of variance in counterproductive behaviors above and beyond the direct effects of perceived overqualification and psychological empowerment. This result showed support for Hypothesis 5. Overall, these results showed that both perceived overqualification and psychological empowerment significantly predicted careerist attitudes and psychological empowerment moderated the relationship between perceived overqualification and careerist attitudes.

In order to illustrate the nature of the significant moderating effect, psychological empowerment was dichotomized using a median split to create “low” and “high” conditions. A simple regression analysis was conducted for each condition of

psychological empowerment. Results are shown in Figure 1. A simple slope analysis showed that perceived overqualification was positively related to counterproductive work behaviors among those with low psychological empowerment ( $\beta = .33, t = 2.85, p < .01$ ). However, for those with high levels of psychological empowerment, the regression analysis did not show a significant relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behaviors ( $\beta = -.08, t = -.67, p > .05$ ).

These results showed that when individuals felt they were overqualified, they were more likely to engage in counterproductive behaviors, only when psychological empowerment was low. There was no relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive behavior when psychological empowerment was high. These results show support for Hypothesis 6.



*Figure 1.* Moderating effect of psychological empowerment on the relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behaviors



## **Discussion**

Perceived overqualification, which is likely to result from feelings of relative deprivation or poor person-job fit, has become an essential area of inquiry due to its negative consequences. As individuals get an education and build their repertoire of skills, knowledge, and abilities, they garner the expectation that they will attain the type of job they feel they deserve to occupy (Erdogan & Bauer, 2009). However, when they do not get the job they believe they deserve, they were likely to experience negative consequences, including reduced job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and increased job turnover (McKee-Ryan et al., 2009).

Given that perceived overqualification is associated with negative outcomes, several researchers (e.g., Erdogan & Bauer, 2009; Harari et al., 2017; Liu & Wang, 2012) have argued that one of the best preventative strategies is to identify boundary conditions that could reduce the occurrence of those negative outcomes. Thus, this study proposed and tested if psychological empowerment would act as a boundary condition for the relationship between perceived overqualification and work attitudes (i.e., affective commitment and careerist attitudes) and behavior (i.e., counterproductive work behaviors).

## **Summary of Findings**

Hypothesis 1 stated that there would be a negative relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment, such that the more overqualified employees felt, the less they would be affectively committed to their organization. Results showed support for the hypothesis, as perceived overqualification negatively predicted affective

commitment. This indicates that if individuals felt that they had more knowledge, skills, and abilities than required by their job, they were less likely to be emotionally attached to their organizations. The results were consistent with past findings, as Johnson and colleagues (2002) found that perceived mismatch between expectation and the reality of the job (i.e., perceived overqualification) had negative consequences on affective commitment due to the frustrations associated with the discrepancy between expected and actual job.

Hypothesis 4 stated that the negative relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment would be moderated by psychological empowerment, such that the negative relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment would be weaker when psychological empowerment was high than when it was low. This hypothesis was not supported as the results of the interaction between perceived overqualification and psychological empowerment on affective commitment was not statistically significant. This indicates that people who felt overqualified for their roles were less likely to affectively commit to their organization, regardless of their levels of psychological empowerment.

These results were somewhat inconsistent with past research in which Erdogan and Bauer (2009) found that psychological empowerment moderated the relationship between perceived overqualification and job satisfaction. More specifically, they found that the relationship between perceived overqualification and job satisfaction was negative when psychological empowerment was low, but the relationship was not significant when psychological empowerment was high. Although the current research expected a similar

outcome when examining the moderating effect of psychological empowerment on the relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment, no interaction was found.

The lack of an interaction in the present study may be due to a difference in the sample between the current study and Erdogan and Bauer (2009). Erdogan and Bauer focused on employees from one occupation (i.e., retail sale) in Turkey, whereas the current study examined participants across many occupations in the United States. Thus, the significant interaction effect in Erdogan and Bauer's study may be attributed to the occupation or country. Alternatively, although job satisfaction and affective commitment have been shown to be strongly related (Mayer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002), job satisfaction is an attitude toward one's role, whereas affective commitment is an attitude toward one's organization. Psychological empowerment, providing self-determination, competence, meaning, and impact, might exert a moderating effect on an attitude toward a job (i.e., job satisfaction) rather than an attitude toward an organization (i.e., affective commitment).

Hypothesis 2 stated that perceived overqualification would be positively related to careerist attitudes, such that the more employees felt that they were overqualified, the more careerist attitudes they would express. Results supported this hypothesis, as participants who believed they had a surplus of knowledge and skill relative to their role requirement also expressed more attitudes such as seeking career development opportunities through deception. This is consistent with previous research, as Bolino and Feldman (2000) and Feldman and Turnley (1995) found a significant relationship

between perceived overqualification and careerist attitudes, such that employees who felt overqualified often lost interest in their careers and developed negative attitudes toward their careers.

Hypothesis 5 stated that the positive relationship between perceived overqualification and careerist attitudes would be moderated by psychological empowerment, such that the positive relationship between perceived overqualification and careerist attitudes would be weaker when psychological empowerment was high than when it was low. However, this hypothesis was not supported. Results of the interaction effect were not statistically significant, which indicate that the participants who felt overqualified were more likely to show careerist attitudes, regardless of whether they were psychologically empowered. This finding is inconsistent with Feldman and Weitz (1991), who hypothesized that employees who felt overqualified would grow cynical about the relationship between hard work and employment success, but when given autonomy, competence, meaning, or impact, they would not develop careerist attitudes. However, the result of the present study indicated that careerist attitudes were not affected by psychological empowerment and those who felt overqualified were likely to continue to pursue career advancement through non-performance-based means. This result may be due to the fact that those who perceive overqualification become cynical about the relationship between hard work and employment success regardless if they were given competence, meaning, impact, or autonomy by their organization.

It is likely that the relationship between perceived overqualification and careerist attitudes is moderated by other variables. An employee's personality may affect this

relationship, as researchers believe that personality may play a role in one's expression of careerist attitudes. For example, Bouzidani and Torun (2019) found that agreeableness moderated the relationship between perceived underemployment and careerist attitudes. More specifically, results showed that when employees were high on agreeableness,, they were less likely to engage in corresponding behaviors including deception and manipulation (i.e. careerist attitudes) even when they felt underemployed. However, when employees were low on agreeableness, they were more likely to engage in careerist attitudes when they felt underemployed. Given that the current study did not find a significant moderating effect of psychological empowerment on the relationship between perceived overqualification and careerist attitudes, future research should examine agreeable personalities as a moderator.

Hypothesis 3 stated that there would be a positive relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behaviors, such that the more employees felt they were overqualified, the more counterproductive work behaviors they would display. Results showed that perceived overqualification positively predicted counterproductive work behaviors, which indicates that individuals who believed they had a surplus of KSAs in regard to their role requirements engaged in more negative behaviors toward their organization such as wasting their employer's supplies, frequent absence, tardiness, and starting arguments with co-workers. These findings supported Hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 6 stated that psychological empowerment would moderate the positive relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behaviors,

such that the positive relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive behaviors would be weaker when psychological empowerment was high than when it was low. Results showed a significant interaction effect between perceived overqualification and psychological empowerment on counterproductive work behaviors. Further analyses showed that the relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive behaviors was significant and positive when psychological empowerment was low, but the relationship was not significant when psychological empowerment was high. More specifically, these results showed that those who believed they had more KSAs than their role required were more likely to be absent, late, or decrease their productivity only when they did not feel competence or experience autonomy in their job. These results showed support for Hypothesis 6.

These results were similar to past findings where Erdogan and Bauer (2009) found that psychological empowerment moderated the relationship between perceived overqualification and voluntary turnover, such that those who believed they were overqualified for their job were more likely to leave their organization only when they were not psychologically empowered. There was no relationship between perceived overqualification and voluntary turnover when employees were psychologically empowered. The results of the present study showed additional evidence that psychological empowerment moderated the relationship between perceived overqualification and another behavior (i.e., counterproductive work behavior).

## **Theoretical Implications**

Consistent with the literature, the results of the present study showed further evidence that perceived overqualification was likely to lead to negative job outcomes. More specifically, if employees felt that they had more KSAs than their job required, they would become less affectively committed to their organization, develop careerist attitudes such as prioritizing personal goals over the company's best interests, and engage in behaviors that could potentially harm their organization, such as consistent absence, tardiness, and decreased productivity. These results are consistent with relative deprivation theory, as it predicts that when individuals want an object or outcome and feel entitled to it, but do not get it, they become frustrated and experience a feeling of discontentment that leads to poorer job attitudes, such as decreased affective commitment, and increased negative job behaviors (McKee-Ryan, Virick, Prussia, Harvey, & Lilly, 2009). These findings are also consistent with person-job fit theory as this theory predicts that when individuals' needs, desires, or goals are not satisfied by the environment or when individuals think have more KSAs than the job requires, they will experience negative outcomes such as decreased job satisfaction and increased turnover intention (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005).

The main contribution of the present study is an examination of psychological empowerment as a moderator of the relationship between perceived overqualification and attitudinal and behavior outcomes. Erdogan and Bauer (2009) called for more research to identify work-related moderators on work-related outcomes of perceived overqualification. Taking on their advice, the current study hypothesized that

psychological empowerment would act as a moderator of the relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment, careerist attitudes, and counterproductive work behaviors. Results showed limited support for these hypotheses. More specifically, the results of the present study demonstrated that perceptions of overqualification were positively related to counterproductive work behavior only when employees reported low levels of empowerment. There was no relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive behavior when psychological empowerment was high.

These results were consistent with Erdogan and Bauer (2009) who found that psychological empowerment moderated the relationship between perceived overqualification and voluntary turnover, only when psychological empowerment was low. This indicates that the negative behavioral outcomes (i.e., counterproductive work behavior) were displayed among those who feel overqualified for their jobs only when they were not psychologically empowered. These findings, along with Erdogan and Bauer's (2009) findings, indicate that the negative outcomes of perceived overqualification were ameliorated. However, psychological empowerment did not moderate the relationship between perceived overqualification and job attitudes (i.e., affective commitment and careerist attitudes). These job attitudes might be moderated by variables other than psychological empowerment.

### **Practical Implications**

There are several practical implications based on the the results of this study. Hiring individuals who feel overqualified, or develop feelings of overqualification while in their



role, is a common problem for companies. Therefore, it is important to find ways to avoid the negative outcomes of perceived overqualification (Erdogan, Tomnas, Valls & Garcia, 2018). One method of avoiding these would be to hire applicants whose KSAs match the requirements for the role in order to reduce the instances of felt overqualification. Given that psychological empowerment did not moderate the relationship between perceived overqualification and job attitudes (i.e. affective commitment and careerist attitudes) and perceived overqualification had a direct relationship with both of those variables, selecting employees whose knowledge, skills, and abilities fit the role may reduce the instances of them feeling overqualified.

Both employers and employees are likely to benefit from finding ways in which there is a strong person-job fit. Recruitment and selection are important contexts in which both applicants and organizations engage in information gathering to determine the fit between the individual and the company and the job (Wilk & Sackett, 1996). The quality of information gathered by a recruiter may affect the proportion of hired applicants within the organization who consider themselves overqualified. Kristof-Brown (2000) demonstrated that interviewers and recruiters with limited training tend to use idiosyncratic criteria in estimating an applicant's person-job fit. This might lead them to hire job applicants who are overqualified for a job. Thus, organizations should train interviewers and recruiters to be aware of necessary job characteristics a candidate would need for the given role. Organizations can also utilize other strategies to foster improved person-job fit, such as finding a different position or even creating a new position within the organization for an employee who feels overqualified so as to take advantage of the

worker's talents. Organizations can also have those who feel overqualified serve as a mentor to those who are new to the organization.

Additionally, given that psychological empowerment moderated the relationship between perceived overqualification and counterproductive work behaviors, employers should psychologically empower those who feel overqualified in order to prevent them from engaging in counterproductive behaviors. For example, Khan and Morrow (1991) suggested that to address self-determination, one dimension of psychological empowerment, employers should give their workers control over how they perform their jobs, in order to give workers a sense of control over their employment situation. By doing so, even employees who feel overqualified are less likely to engage in counterproductive behaviors. To address meaning and impact, other dimensions of psychological empowerment, managers should recognize their employees' contributions to the business. Finally, to address competence, another dimension of psychological empowerment, managers should, whenever possible, include employees in decision-making and goal setting.

However, further research is needed to develop specific interventions to help employees who perceive they are overqualified for their role. Johnson and Johnson (1996) found that the negative consequences of perceived overqualification were reduced for workers who received emotional support from their organization. More specifically, when employees who felt overqualified were given sympathy, comfort, and encouragement by their manager, they decreased negative behaviors such as absence and lowered productivity. If companies intend to help their workforce cope with feelings of

overqualification, they should try to develop a supportive climate. Given this, research is needed to explicitly develop, administer, and evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions before recommendations for practice can be made.

### **Strengths, Limitations, and Future Direction**

The present study contributed to the current literature because this study was the first to examine psychological empowerment as a boundary condition for the relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment, careerist attitudes, and counterproductive work behaviors. Second, because of the variety of participant occupations, the results of the present study might be generalizable across different occupations, rather than limited to one occupation. This is particularly important for future research, in that occupational demographics might be a factor to consider in the relationship between perceived overqualification and psychological empowerment.

Additionally, the results of the present research suggest that perceived overqualification is a problem that may not affect only entry-level employees. Previous research has focused on recent graduates and junior-level employees to examine the negative consequences of perceived overqualification (e.g. Feldman & Turnley, 1995). However, the present study included employees with varying degrees of tenure. Thus, perceived overqualification does not seem to be an issue for only recent graduates or junior-level employees. This suggests that future research should also examine the negative affects of perceived overqualification on mid-level and senior-level employees.

As with any other study, the current study is not without limitations. First, this study utilized self-report surveys, which may not be the most accurate type of data collection

regarding the variables measured. Although felt overqualification is most often subjectively determined, common method variance (i.e. a participants' need to provide logically consistent results) may have been a problem as this variance is attributed to the measurement method rather than to the constructs the measures were assumed to represent (Bolino et al., 2000). Future studies could include objective measures of the variables, such as the number of counterproductive work behaviors reported by one's supervisor.

Another issue with self-report surveys is social desirability bias. Although a survey is a valuable method in understanding how people think about themselves and their work environment, their answers may be different when measured objectively (Spector, 1994). For example, employees may report false or biased information, outside factors may influence the way the participant responds (i.e. a recent negative experience that contributed to their sense of psychological empowerment). When participants complete a self-report survey, they may answer the items based on what they believe is the "correct" or socially acceptable way to answer items about themselves or their company, thus distorting data (Bolino & Feldman, 2000).

Additionally, utilizing an online survey may lead to higher rates of participant distraction and confusion. Although I do not have the ability to control for the events that affect an employee's personal life or well-being, there are certain methods to help minimize these factors. For example, by collecting data in person, I would be able to personally administer the items and clarify item phrasing to participants. During the current study, participants emailed questions regarding the clarity of survey items. Their

confusion may have influenced their overall answers, which could have been mitigated if the survey was administered in person. Collecting data in person would also allow researchers to answer participants' questions as well as control for distractions and noise level.

Another weakness of this study concerns the issue of self-report data. Given that the current study utilized only self-report surveys as the form of data collection, a causal relationship cannot be made regarding the relationship between perceived overqualification and the three outcomes (i.e. affective commitment, careerist attitudes, counterproductive work behaviors). Therefore, I am unable to state that perceived overqualification caused people to be less affectively committed to their organization, develop more careerist attitudes, and engaged in more counterproductive work behaviors.

Additionally, the current study used an assumption that perceived overqualification is involuntary and undesirable for employees. Although this may be true for most workers, perceiving overqualification could be voluntary. For example, employees may choose a less challenging job because of health limitations, family responsibilities, or for additional leisure time. For example, older workers may take roles below their qualifications to maintain their lifestyle and social connections (e.g. Wang, Zhan, Liu, & Shultz, 2008). This perception of overqualification could be quite different from employees who desire better jobs but have to settle for low-quality jobs (Liu, Huang, & Wang, 2014).

In addition, perceived overqualification in a temporary role may be more tolerable if the employee is compensated from the lack of temporary skill utilization by better

promotion opportunities. Based on the career mobility hypothesis, which states that overeducated workers are more likely to leave a job than adequately educated workers in the same job (Dekker, De Grip, & Heijke, 2002), workers may temporarily enter jobs for which they are over-educated to obtain the work experience and training needed for progression to higher level positions. In these more voluntary cases, perceived overqualification may not lead to negative outcomes. Future research should differentiate between voluntary and involuntary overqualification and explore potentially differential outcomes of these two types of overqualification.

## **Conclusion**

The goal of the current study was to examine the moderating effect of psychological empowerment on the relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment, careerist attitudes, and counterproductive work behaviors. The findings of this research indicate that those who perceive overqualified are likely to engage in counterproductive work behaviors only when psychological empowerment is low. It seems that a lack of autonomy and ability to make decisions in one's career can increase the negative work-related behaviors as a result of feeling overqualified and suggests that these negative outcomes could be avoidable when they are psychologically empowered.

Consistent with previous research, the current study found that employees who felt overqualified might be less affectively committed to their organization and might express more careerist attitudes. However, there was no moderating effect of psychological empowerment on the relationship between perceived overqualification and affective commitment or careerist attitudes. These inconsistent results suggest that more research

should be conducted in regards to the moderating effect of psychological empowerment on the relationship between perceived overqualification and its consequences in order to reduce the instances of negative behavioral and attitudinal outcomes in the workplace.

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## Appendix

### Demographic Questionnaire

Are you currently employed?

- I am currently employed, working 40 or more hours per week
- I am currently employed, working 1-39 hours per week
- I am not currently employed

How long have you been employed at your current company?

- Less than 3 months
- 3 months - 2 years
- 3 years - 5 years
- 6 years - 8 years
- 9 years - 11 years
- 12 years - 14 years
- 15+ years

Which of the following best describes the industry in which you work?

- Computer Software / Electronics
- Education
- Engineering / Architecture
- Entertainment, Media, Recreation
- Finance / Insurance
- Food Services
- Healthcare / Pharmaceutical
- Legal
- Manufacturing
- Real Estate
- Sales / Retail
- Other

What is your age?

- 18 - 24 years
- 25 - 34 years
- 35 - 44 years
- 45 - 54 years
- 55 - 64 years
- 65 or older

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Prefer not to respond

What is your ethnicity (or race)?

- Hispanics of any race
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Two or more races
- Race and Ethnicity Unknown
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer not to respond

## Scale Items

### **Perceived Overqualification Items**

- My job requires less education than I have .
- The work experience that I have is not necessary to be successful on this job.
- I have job skills that are not required for this role.
- Someone with less education than myself could perform well on my job.
- I have a lot of knowledge that I don't need in order to do my job.
- Someone with less work experience than myself could do my job just as well.
- I have more abilities than I need in order to do my job.

### **Affective Commitment Items**

- I would be happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization.
- I enjoy discussing my organization with people outside it.
- I feel that this organization's problems are my own.
- I do not think I could easily be as attached to another organization as I am to this one.
- I feel like 'part of the family' at my organization.
- I feel emotionally attached to this organization.
- This organization has a great deal of personal meaning to me.
- I feel a strong sense of belonging to my organization.

### **Careerist Attitude Items**

- It's hard to get ahead in an organization on sheer merit alone.
- Who you know is more important in an organization than what you know.
- Sometimes you have to use your social relationships with your coworkers and bosses to get ahead in an organization.
- In terms of getting ahead in an organization, looking and acting like a winner can be more instrumental than simply being very competent.
- You can't be completely honest when dealing with your boss.

Occasionally, you have to distort information you give to your employer to promote your own self-interest.

You can't count on organizations to look out for your own best career interests.

Loyalty to one's employer is unlikely to be rewarded.

### **Counterproductive Work Behavior Items**

Purposely wasted your employer's supplies.

Complained about insignificant things at work.

Told people outside the job what a lousy place you work for.

Came to work late without permission.

Stayed home from work and said you were sick when you weren't.

Insulted someone about their job performance.

Ignored someone at work.

Started an argument with someone at work.

### **Psychological Empowerment Items**

My job activities are personally meaningful to me.

I can decide on my own how to go about doing my own work.

I have mastered the skills necessary for my job.

The work I do is meaningful to me.

I have significant influence over what happens in my department.

I am self-assured about my capabilities to perform my work activities.

The work I do is important to me.

I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job.